

PHILOSOPHY AS DRAMATURGY

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I have always believed that drama is the best medium for the development of thought, especially if the thinker wants to get others to participate in a line of reflection. In fact, as President of the Sociology and Social Policy division of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 2008-9, I staged two plays, one of which received much publicity. It involved Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin (both born 12 February 1809) returning to a 2009 chat show to discuss what they make of our times. I am now writing a play – hopefully to be staged for Kant's 300th birthday in 2024 – that has a young Kant visit Linnaeus and Swedenborg in Uppsala in 1759.

The constraints of drama as a genre provide many philosophical affordances. It is easier to consider alternatives when thought is enacted on a stage. This applies not only to drama in the strict sense of scripted plays but also to the forensic use of video recording of 'real-life' action, both on the playing field and the court room. Behind this is a folk etymological understanding of 'theatre' rooted in 'theory' and ultimately *theos*. It informs the phrase 'theatre of war', the object of which is a bounded field of possibilities, which c19 German strategic thinking canonized as *Spielraum*. (I have argued that the post-truth condition sees everything this way.) Plato feared the power of drama because playwrights could cast familiar things in an unfamiliar light, thereby implicitly challenging that things must be the way they are. In other words, the *Spielraum* – literally 'room to maneuver' -- would be revealed to be larger than originally thought. This explains the historic role of modern drama – starting with Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' -- to initiate or amplify social change, typically by giving latent social tendencies greater visibility and voice. In that respect, playwrights are the rhetorical rivals of politicians.

Of course, Plato himself produced dialogues, but their typically open-ended character meant that their import remained somewhat unclear until the Enlightenment, when Socrates started to be consistently interpreted as winning the argument. Instead of being seen as a mere joker, who engaged in 'thrust and parry' with his opponents, Socrates came to be seen as carefully leading opponents to their philosophical demise and in the process demonstrating his own superiority. In this context, Socrates appears as an 'ironist', who always already knows that he will win because he is basically Plato's mouthpiece. It is easy to see how a certain didactic form of drama can be generated from this model, notably GB Shaw's -- and arguably, even the deployment of the 'dialectic' in Hegel and Marx. However, from a strictly dramaturgical standpoint, it raises questions about the appropriateness of the playwright's viewpoint being so strongly tied to that of the play's protagonist. While Shaw saw himself as a disciple of Ibsen, perhaps Luigi Pirandello's looser 'Six Characters in Search of an Author' approach sticks closer to the precedent set by Ibsen – and may even be closer to Plato's own, and in any case one worth emulating now.